

Preservation must en

In South Florida, we seldom think of history in terms of much more than a single century, and yet, that is not the case: There are places where geology, ecology, archaeology and architecture all converge.

At first there was the land and little else. Then — beginning 10,000 or more years ago — the first Indi-



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ans arrived to make their homes along the bluffs and ridges that rose out of the watery landscape, the high points overlooking the bay, along the rivers and streams.

Even then, this was prime real estate. It

is no coincidence that our most-coveted land is also the ground with the richest history.

But if it is desirable, it is also endangered. Its fragility was made clear earlier this month when a segment of the remarkable coral bluff along South Bayshore Drive collapsed during excavation for a swimming pool.

Throughout South Florida, preservationists, archaeologists and environmentalists rush to document, dig and conserve.

"This is it. This is the only opportunity to preserve what we have left," said Dade County Archaeologist Robert Carr. "That is why it's such an intense and frustrating struggle."

Often we think of historic preservation as a building-by-building task. But our concern ought to encompass more than just stucco and stones for the picture to be complete. To see the past whole we must look at the natural landscape, and at the imprint left by early settlers on the land.

In generations past, the new was layered on the land gently without disturbing what had come before. Now, too often, the path is one of destruction.

Stunning contrasts

The contrasts are stunning: Step out in front of Cocoplovis, one of the last Boom-Era mansions on Brickell Avenue, and there are steps carved gently into the bluff. But up and down the bayfront, buildings sit on fill; parking lots have flattened the natural terrain.



TAMARA VONINSKI / Miami Herald

MIAMI RIVER RAPIDS PARK: Once the point where the river began its rush to the ocean, the park is now strewn with trash.

the Miami River.

River Rapids Park

Just off South River Drive and Northwest 27th Avenue is a small and unadorned park that marks the beginning of development in modern Miami. It is called Miami River Rapids Park, and it sits in virtual abandonment, with only a sign and a low wooden fence to mark it.

Until this century, the Everglades ended and the Atlantic coastal ridge began here as the river started its rush to the ocean. In the 1840s, George Washington Ferguson and Thomas Jefferson Ferguson built a mill on the site, one of the region's earliest industries; in 1908 the river was diverted in the first draining of the Everglades.

Now all that is left is a trickle of water flowing past rocks and pond apple trees, garbage and debris. It ought to be a major interpretive site, one that schoolchildren study

Now, at best, preservation is a matter of negotiation. Witness what happens:

When he built his house in Cutler Ridge, Charles Deering did not disturb the fossils on his land.

Now most of his estate is in public hands, but the fossil site adjacent to it — the location of Indian settlements that are 10,000 years old — is for sale. Two years ago, the Metro Commission turned down plans for a shopping center there; now the county wants to buy the Cutler Fossil Site and is hoping that the state will help with half of the \$3.5 million asking price.

The old Perry Farm at the Dade-Broward line, which archaeologists suspect was also the location of an ancient Indian encampment, is soon to become the Oaks of Miramar housing and shopping complex; the terrain rises there to what once was an island in Snake Creek. Archaeologists will get a chance to explore

At Arch Creek Park in North Miami, a nature trail guides visitors through hammock and pineland, across a site where the Tequesta Indians lived for 1,800 years, and past an excavated coontie mill, a remnant of a settlement that dates back to the Indian wars of the mid-1800s. It is an extraordinary enclave where history and nature converge.

But follow the creek south and the more typical course of history unfolds: Where once there was hammock and pineland, now there are the Shoppes of Biscayne and the Shoppes of Arch Creek beckoning cars off Biscayne Boulevard.

Government, which ought to be a caretaker of our heritage, is sometimes its enemy. Two years ago, county road crews uprooted 162 pine, holly, gumbo limbo, seagrape and cocoplum trees on Crandon Boulevard on Key Biscayne before a public outcry stopped the destruction; the state Department of Transportation once tried to remove the banyans from Coral Way.

And the proposed Brickell extension of the Metromover will take a route right through the last turn-of-the-century house left just south of

and historians visit. But the story of the rapids is not a simple, or a smooth, one.

The state acquired the property on either side of the park so that Miami could expand and improve it, but city commissioners instead voted to lease the land to Miami Bridge for the construction of a halfway house. The state turned down that plan, but the city is appealing the decision.

Tuesday afternoon, the Miami Heritage Conservation Board will consider recommending the designation of the park as an official archaeological zone, which would mean that no excavation or tree removal could be undertaken without the recommendation of the Dade County archaeologist. Even so, the halfway house could be built.

Surely, there's an alternative site for it: There should be no question about its importance.

Cities as repositories

Cities are not like chalkboards erased with each new subject: They are complex repositories of history and civilization, and they deserve our respect.

the site before construction begins; the developers were also required by the city of Miramar to create a two-acre park of a 100-year-old oak hammock.

The old Glenn Curtiss mansion, home of the aviation pioneer who dreamed up the pueblo-styled town of Miami Springs, has just been sold; its grounds — where once flamin-

compass landscape



TREASURE TROVE: The developer plans to preserve some of the sculpture fragments and other relics on the Coconut Grove site.

gos, swans and African crested cranes nested — may be filled with 96 condominiums by its new owner, Biscay Development. That of itself doesn't alarm preservationists, although Miami Springs' historical society had hoped to acquire the house as a museum. Still, the land can be developed sensitively or with complete disregard for the historic landscape. "It could be very nicely done," said Dade's Historic Preservation Board director Ivan Rodriguez.

A model for sensitive development may come at Treasure Trove, at 2485 S. Bayshore Dr., on land where Midwestern industrialist Ernest C. Cole built his house between 1914 and 1917, the same time that Vizcaya was under construction. The house itself burned down some years ago, but an old Indian well and a variety of sculpture remain.

The architect designing eight

"estate houses" is Charles Harrison Pawley, who was the first chairman of Dade's Historic Preservation Board. His plans include saving all the trees and keeping the bluff — part of the same coastal ridge system that fell earlier this month — intact. The well will be preserved and some of the sculpture, badly vandalized, will be recreated. He has fought Miami city officials who wanted to cut two 25-foot roads through the site. The plans — which will also be aired at the Heritage Conservation Board on Tuesday — call for a single 18-foot-wide road instead. Still, some of the coral rock sculptures and an old pump house, as well as the original gates bearing the name Treasure Trove, will be lost, which is a shame.

And yet the alternative would be to go the route so many do, ignoring the past completely.

"We can't save everything," said Carr. "It's just finding the balance between development and preservation."

Preserving the best

The public mandate here ought to be to identify and conserve the most important sites, the best examples of life in South Florida, from prehistory to recent history, and those sites that communicate the historic natural environment.

In August, Broward County agreed to buy 101 acres of undisturbed oak hammocks and ancient Indian archaeological sites known as Pine Island Ridge, using money from a \$75-million fund approved in a March referendum, and splitting the \$7.2 million cost with the state's Conservation and Recreation Land fund. The town of Davie will buy another 300 acres with a \$10 million bond issue.

Less than a month later, workmen moving a tree to widen Pine Island Road found an Indian skeleton, the first evidence of a sacred Indian burial ground dating back 1,000 to 2,000 years, one of the best preserved cemeteries that archaeologist Carr had ever encountered.

State funds are available for endangered lands, but the demand for that money — about \$40 million this year — is so great that it could be spent a dozen times over. That is another reason why it is so important to establish priorities.

Without the tangible record of settlement in South Florida we will never be able to grasp our history fully. In many ways, this is the last stand. If we destroy what is left, we'll take with us a millennia, and that would be a loss of monumental proportions.